

VZCZCXRO9679
OO RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHML #1500/01 1980422
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 170422Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4648
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001500

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2019
TAGS: [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: MALACANANG: NO AMNESTY FOR TERRORISTS

REF: A. MANILA 1468 (LAST REMAINING ICRC HOSTAGE EUGENIO
VAGNI RELEASED)

[1](#)B. MANILA 1324 (SIX MONTHS LATER RED CROSS HOSTAGE
STILL HELD BY TERRORIST GROUP)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Malacanang Palace and numerous legislative leaders have rejected a July 14 suggestion by Philippine National Red Cross Chairman Senator Richard Gordon that the government grant amnesty to Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists who kidnapped three International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) workers in January, the last of whom was only released July 12 after six months of captivity in the jungles of Jolo Island. Malacanang and virtually all other voices in Philippine government circles have made abundantly clear they want nothing to do with granting amnesty to the country's bloodiest terrorist group. The Mission has reached out to our Philippine interlocutors at every level to underscore that any such amnesty for terrorists would have the most severe repercussions for future bilateral cooperation in counterterrorism and law enforcement. END SUMMARY.

SENATOR SUPPORTS AMNESTY FOR ASG

[1](#)2. (C) In the wake of the July 12 release of Red Cross hostage Eugenio Vagni by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists on Jolo Island, Philippine National Red Cross Chairman Senator Richard Gordon this week proposed amnesty for the ASG, a call that was roundly criticized by key national and local officials, and even ridiculed by Senator Gordon's congressional colleagues. On the margins of Vagni's July 14 courtesy call with President Arroyo, Gordon reportedly told Malacanang Palace Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita that amnesty for the ASG, combined with economic development programs, could give the terrorists an alternative to kidnapping. Ermita initially said that, pending a review of Gordon's specific proposal, the government would continue to apply military pressure while pursuing development efforts in the southern Philippines. Following Ermita's statement, Deputy Presidential Spokesperson Gary Olivar said there appeared to be "little ground" on which to base any amnesty for the ASG. Speaking from a conference venue in Bali, former Presidential Advisor for the Peace Process Jess Dureza (now Presidential Advisor for Mindanao Affairs) was rather less guarded in his response, saying, "No way! They have committed the worst inhuman and barbaric crimes. They must be made to pay for those atrocities."

ERMITA: "CATEGORICALLY OPPOSED"

[1](#)3. (C) In a private July 16 conversation with the Ambassador, Executive Secretary Ermita emphasized that the Philippine government was categorically opposed to any such

amnesty, and that the muted initial reaction had only been due to a junior-level deputy spokesperson being caught off-guard by a questioner. Ermita went on to say that President Arroyo's cabinet was of one accord on the issue, and that although amnesty might be an appropriate component of peace negotiations with an insurgent group such as the MILF, it had no place in dealing with active and unapologetic terrorists. The Ambassador outlined that the Philippine government's initially mild reaction to Gordon's proposal had caught our attention, and any such move would of course drastically affect all bilateral counterterrorism and law enforcement cooperation. Ermita said that he understood completely, and agreed that Gordon's proposal should receive no further consideration. Ambassador later spoke with former Presidential Advisor for the Peace Process Jess Dureza (now Advisor for Mindanao Affairs), thanking him for his strong and unequivocal statements on the idea of amnesty.

KEY NATIONAL AND LOCAL OFFICIALS OPPOSE AMNESTY

14. (C) Gordon's amnesty proposal drew strong criticism from senior cabinet officials and congressional lawmakers. Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro said the idea would send the wrong signal about the Philippine government's commitment to international counterterrorism efforts. Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Raul Gonzalez and National Security Advisor Norberto Gonzales both cautioned that the Philippines should not accommodate extremism, while Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process Avelino Razon Jr., who has been tasked by Malacaang to lead the review of the proposal, questioned its moral and legal grounds. The ASG, Razon noted, was still

MANILA 00001500 002 OF 002

considered a terrorist group without a political agenda. On the congressional side, Muntinlupa Representative Rufino Biazon said the proposal runs counter to the government's policy of not negotiating with terrorists, and is akin to giving them "retirement benefits."

15. (C) Philippine House of Representatives Speaker Prospero Nograles stressed that amnesty does not cover criminal offenses perpetrated by terrorists and criminals; possible parole or pardon would only be relevant after a plea of guilty by the perpetrator. Nograles added that granting amnesty to terrorists should not compromise the search for peace and justice. Senators Manuel Villar Jr., Francis Pangilinan, Alan Peter Cayetano, and Rodolfo Biazon were all likewise unreceptive to the proposal. For his part, Sen. Biazon vowed to block all efforts to grant amnesty to the Abu Sayyaf, and Sen. Pangilinan cited the need for congressional approval of any such move -- approval that he doubted would be granted.

MISSION OUTREACH DISCOURAGES NOTION

16. (C) In a July 15 conversation with USAID Mission Director, Office of Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process (OPAPP) Undersecretary Nabil Tan said that amnesty was just "Senator Gordon's idea," and was not supported by OPAPP or provincial leaders. Undersecretary Tan said amnesty for the ASG was not feasible, and that the ASG should be made to "pay for their crimes," adding that they should "come down from the hills and face the law." He planned to find ways for OPAPP to publicly convey the message that amnesty was the wrong approach. Jolo Governor Sakur Tan told the USAID Director that he likewise disagreed with the concept of amnesty, noting that it would "embolden the ASG," making the situation on Jolo "more dangerous for everyone." In a separate conversation with USAID Mission Director, Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema indicated that he thought any talk of amnesty for the ASG kidnappers was "insane." At a July 15 event in Manila attended by poloff, a Department of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary and a retired senior military official

both scoffed at the idea that amnesty should be granted.

17. (C) In addition to the above conversations with OPAPP, Governor Tan, and Mayor Sema, the Mission also reached out to key counterparts in the law enforcement community, the Philippine Department of Justice, the military, and the Philippine intelligence community to point out that any move to grant amnesty to the ASG would seriously undermine bilateral counterterrorism and law enforcement cooperation. In each case, Philippine interlocutors offered assurances that Senator Gordon's musings would never gain traction in the Philippines. The Embassy coordinated guidance released to the press that underscored how any such move toward amnesty would go against the Philippine government's policy of not negotiating with terrorists, and that applying the rule of law through effective law enforcement and holding criminals and terrorists accountable for their actions was the best way to bring lasting peace and prosperity to Mindanao and elsewhere.

KENNEY